

Zero Tolerance or Responsible Drinking? Sending a Clear Parental Message

By Bridget Ingebrigtsen

Vicki Ettelson thought she had everything covered. Following an alcohol-related crash in the Deerfield, Illinois community that killed two teenagers, Ettelson decided to host an alcohol-free New Year's Eve party for her teenage son's friends. She made it clear – no drugs or alcohol in her home. She checked the purses and coats of all 60 guests to make sure nothing was smuggled in and checked on the teens periodically to make sure they were behaving.

The party was a success – or at least so it seemed. As the last guest was leaving, she told Ettelson that despite her efforts, there was alcohol at the party. Someone had lowered a few bottles of beer into the basement window well and brought it in through the window. “I was flabbergasted,” Ettelson said. “But it just goes to show you that part of being a teenager is pushing the envelope, so parents have to stay on their toes to try to stop them.”

Although she was outsmarted in her own home, Ettelson realizes that as a parent she has incredible power to help her children make the right choices, and research has proven this to be true. According to a study by the Office of National Drug Control Policy, “...all roads lead back to parents – and for good reason. Available research is unambiguous about the importance of having parents discuss the dangers of illegal drugs and underage drinking with their children. Parents and other caregivers need to do more than simply talk about drugs and alcohol. They also need to act, by monitoring the behavior of teen children, knowing where their teenagers are at all times, particularly after school, and knowing whom they are with and what they are doing...”¹

Despite these findings, much of society seems to view underage drinking as uncontrollable and a “rite of passage.” As a result, teens think it is acceptable to drink, and their parents reinforce this notion by either not saying otherwise or by condoning the behavior and allowing their teens to drink “responsibly” at home.

A survey conducted by Harris Interactive and Teenage Research Unlimited concluded that, “One out of four parents of children, aged 12 to 20, indicates that they have allowed their teens to drink under their supervision in the past six months. Approximately one in 12 indicated that they have allowed their teen's friends to drink under their supervision.”² Liz Nelson, community health specialist for the Lake County Health Department/Community Health Center, said there are many parents who allow their teenage children to drink at home, “although you'd be hard-pressed to find any parent who would admit that publicly.”

The fact that drinking under the age of 21 is illegal in most states, including Illinois, could be one reason that parents won't express their views publicly. The Harris Interactive and Teenage Research Unlimited study concluded, “While approximately seven of 10 parents of children aged 12 to 20 disagreed with the statement that ‘teen drinking was okay if a parent were present,’ three out of four of those same parents believe it is likely that teenagers obtain alcohol from a parent with their knowledge.”

Nelson said that while the health department cannot dictate what people do in the privacy of their own homes, “what we can say to them is that when it comes to other people's children, you have to adhere to the law.” While the social hosting law that was passed in Illinois in 2005 has added some consequences for serving teens liquor, Nelson said it could stand to be even tougher and include limousines and buses. In Lake County, there is a movement for towns to strengthen their ordinances related to underage drinking.

To help enlighten parents about the temptations their children may face within the community (underage drinking parties, popular drinking spots), Ettelson started a parent-based initiative in Deerfield called People Rallying in Opposition to Underage Drinking, or PROUD. The group consisted of about 20 local parents who would meet regularly at various participants' homes to discuss what was going on in the community, Ettelson said. The group disbanded over time due to a lack of interest. “I felt that it could have been any of our children in that car [alcohol-involved crash that killed two local teens], so I wanted to do *something*,” Ettelson said. “I tried.”

But, she said she still feels there is a need in the community for a parent group. “If I had to do it over again, I would narrow the focus on middle school, because in middle school there is still parental involvement,” Ettelson said. “Once they go to high school, some parents have already let go.”



Driving Home the Right Message

When parents talk to their children about alcohol, they can't be "gray on the issue," said Stacy Vermynen, director of the Lake Forest/Lake Bluff Underage Drinking Prevention Coalition. "You have to be black and white, and say that drinking under the age of 21 is wrong and it's against the law."

However, she knows she is up against those parents who believe that allowing their children to drink at home will "demystify" alcohol and possibly prevent binge drinking. "We hear from very intelligent people that if you put a substance before kids they will no longer want it, just like candy," she said.

Teens may not be so easy to convince either. The surgeon general reports alcohol is the drug of choice among America's adolescents, used by more young people than tobacco or illicit drugs. An estimated 11 million young people between the ages of 12 and 20 (28 percent of this age group) are current drinkers. Nearly 7 million (19 percent) are binge drinkers, and 2 million (six percent) are heavy drinkers.³

Vermynen said research (*see page 16*) that shows the harmful effects of alcohol on a teen's brain is one good reason why teens should not be allowed to drink at all. At the same time, parents need to understand that teens, because of their age and the changes occurring with their bodies, will want to take risks. Therefore, Vermynen said, parents should try to offer their teens positive risk-taking experiences such as exercising, playing sports or volunteering in the community.

And when teens go off to college, where underage drinking is often the norm, parents may feel that their child's drinking is out of their control. But Betty Frank-Bailey, executive director of Linking Efforts Against Drugs, or LEAD, said parents would be surprised at how much their children heed their advice even when they are far away from home. LEAD, which serves the communities of Lake Bluff, Lake Forest and Knollwood, is a community organization dedicated to parents and other adults and their role in the promotion of healthy family relationships and the prevention of alcohol and other drug use and risky behavior by youth.

"Especially when your children go off to college, you have to reinforce your family values with them about underage drinking. Share the consequences with them. Tell them you disapprove. You would be surprised at how that communication will temper their behavior," Frank-Bailey said.

Through the persistence of parent organizations and communities, Vermynen said the hope is that one day underage drinking will be viewed as socially unacceptable. Meantime, she and many other concerned parents will continue their fight – a fight they believe will help save lives.

Ingebrigtsen is Contributing Editor for Prevention First.

Sources:

¹http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/policy/ndcs05/stopping_use.html;

²<http://www.amaassn.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/388/keyfindings.pdf>;

³<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/programs.html>